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They navigated virtual school, now these Nashville families face an agonizing decision on return to classroom



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Some days are easier than others for Nashville students.

There are the days when the house is quiet and math class is hard, but enjoyable for Wilton Alexander. His little sister, Abigail, has all the supplies she needs for science experiments and the internet connection is fast.

Maya Price gets to visit with her friends and play dolls, or cornhole or throw frisbees — at a distance — in the yard.

Across town at the Hagan-Dier house, the four kids in their makeshift "learning pod" get along, stay on task and don't rile up the family dogs.

But then on other days, Microsoft Teams crashes, or Wilton's sisters drop off their nieces and nephews while they go to work, leaving the house filled with loud toddlers.

Maya has to load up into the backseat of the family car, her tablet in tow, to pick up her mom from her chemotherapy appointments and Jennifer Hagan-Dier has to be the "bad guy" and lay down the law in the learning pod.

These families are among the thousands across Nashville who have been grappling with school at home for the past eight weeks because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and making adjustments to their daily lives.

LaTonya and William Alexander altered their schedules to make sure someone is always home with the children. They also found a church where two of their foster children can get help with virtual learning.

The Price family stay pretty isolated — they knew from the beginning that Maya would not be able to return to school while the coronavirus is still active.

The Hagan-Dier and four other families banded together to create a learning pod. They hired a tutor and cleared out a room in the East Nashville house for a makeshift classroom.

Victoria Gordon doesn't work; instead, she stays home with her sixth-grader, Malik, to keep him on track.

How and whether to reopen schools for in-person learning has been one of the most difficult and contentious issues facing the city.

A parent-led coalition formed to push for schools to reopen sooner, and school board member Fran Bush helped organize a rally alongside parents and student-athletes. One board member, Gini Pupo-Walker, even faces a recall effort because of her support for the district’s plan to phase in the reopening of classrooms.

Spread across seven different schools, including two public charter schools, and six different grade-levels, the students in these four families have had different experiences — good and bad — with virtual learning. And with Metro Schools slated to begin reopening after fall break, these families — and countless others like them — have had to make the agonizing decision on whether to stick with virtual learning or send their children back to school.

Remote opportunities

Every couple of weeks, Maya Price, a sixth-grader, patiently waits for her mother, Tamara Price, to finish her chemotherapy appointments. Tamara Price has Stage 4 breast cancer.

Depending on her virtual learning schedule, Maya will bring her tablet or laptop and participate in lessons, complete assignments or talk with one of the several therapists and staff members she works with individually while she waits.

For the Price family, going back to school while the coronavirus is still spreading in Nashville was never an option.

The Prices are among the roughly 46% of Metro School families that have opted to stick with virtual learning, according to survey results released by the district this week. About 54% of families who responded to the survey plan to attend in-person when schools reopen, but thousands of families didn't respond to the survey at all so schools are planning for as many as 66% of students to return in-person.

Though there is still much that researchers don't know about how the virus affects children, research shows that children are more likely to be asymptomatic and many believe they play a role in transmitting the virus. School districts across the state have already reported dozens of cases of COVID-19 since schools reopened.

But keeping Maya at home wasn't an easy decision, either. As a student with disabilities, Maya depends on a range of services at her school, J.T. Moore Middle School, and like most budding teenagers, she misses her peers.

"She still misses teacher hugs and her friends," Tamara Price recently told The Tennessean. "She gets lots of help (from) her friends at J.T. Moore, which I had hoped would be the case."

But learning from home has also given Maya, and her parents, the opportunity to reflect on her learning. Tamara Price, who isn't working full-time because of her diagnosis, is able to observe Maya in class and help her with assignments.

Maya has nystagmus, a vision condition that makes it hard for her to focus on objects far away, like a blackboard at school, or navigate crowded hallways.

Her parents have noticed that even though Maya is spending more time in front of a screen, she is learning how to manage her vision challenges.

"School-wise she is doing better and she's less anxious and she can focus on her screen and her schoolwork better," Tamara Price said.

Maya also spends a lot of time in live classroom settings or meeting one-on-one with other school staff. She has synchronous, or live, class meetings three days a week and her physical education class meets live daily — Tamara Price can tell by the sounds of Maya jumping around in her bedroom.

In a given week, Maya also might meet with her speech therapist at least once, have an occupational therapy session and work with her exceptional education teacher on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Her IEP (Individualized Education Plan) case manager also checks in with Maya once a week.

"She meets weekly with her for more of a check-in to see how she's doing and make sure she's well-rounded," Tamara Price said. "She asks her questions like, 'Are you still having time to play? Are you working too much?' So her case manager talks to Maya directly."

But the amount of time students spend in live class meetings or working on assignments varies — from school to school and grade to grade. Educators acknowledged that virtual learning would be a mix of live instruction and self-paced or independent assignments, when virtual learning launched.

The use of the Florida Virtual School curriculum across the district is meant to mitigate differences across schools as well as between students who are learning in-person versus learning remotely, district officials have said, but some parents still wonder if kids are getting the same education.

When home is also school

On a recent Monday, Wilton Alexander, a sophomore at Maplewood High School, rubbed sleep from his eyes and scrolled through Schoology, the learning platform Metro Schools uses to host the Florida Virtual School content.

It's 9:20 a.m. and Wilton's Spanish 1 class should be meeting, but he doesn't have a class meeting that day, or at least he doesn't think he does, Wilton said. All the instructions and course content is in Spanish, he shrugs.

Most days, Wilton and his siblings might have live class meetings from around 8 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. but classes don't always last the full period, Wilton's mom, LaTonya Alexander told The Tennessean.

That Monday, Wilton scrolls through multiple-choice math questions during his math class, while his younger sister, Abigail, listens in to a live class meeting via Microsoft Teams.

Math used to be his favorite class, Wilton said.

"Math is hard, but I liked it," he said. "But it's hard to keep up with and understand it on the computer."

On one side of her screen, Abigail has extra coursework pulled up — because she's already finished the day's assignments — with the live class meeting minimized in

the corner.

Abigail, a fifth-grader at Head Middle Magnet Prep, gets a lot of work, LaTonya Alexander said. It keeps her busy.

But sometimes it's difficult to keep Wilton and their older sister, Anaya Alexander, a senior at Maplewood High School busy.

Anaya has an intellectual disability and has trouble logging in to her computer or class sessions on her own. Anaya's lifeskills class meets daily, LaTonya Alexander said, but sometimes it might only meet for 15 or 20 minutes.

"It'll get to 11:30 a.m. and they'll logoff and think they're done for the day," LaTonya Alexander said. "But they might still have assignments or other work to do, or they might not. It's hard to keep up."

On the first day of school, the Alexanders couldn't log in to their district-issued laptops though and their hotspots were spotty. But that has gotten better, the students say.

Other things have gotten better, too.

The Alexanders care for four foster children, including two who are school-aged. On the first day of school, a second grader bounced around Abigail's chair in the family's living room, in between class meetings and the kindergartener sat forlorn and laptopless.

But since then, LaTonya Alexander found out that Grace Baptist Church offers a space for foster children to go to and get help with their virtual learning throughout the school day. She and her sister take turns dropping the kids off at 7 a.m. or picking them up in the evening, grateful that the youngest learners have a place to go.

The foster kids will be able to return to school the soonest, with grades K-2 slated to return after fall break. Anaya and Abigail will likely be next, but Wilton won't return

to campus until January.

"I think it's dumb," Wilton said. "We all should be able to go back at the same time."

Victoria Gordon also notices the gap in instruction from one school to another, one student to another.

In a way, her son Malik, who attends Nashville Classical Charter School, is lucky. Gordon stopped working several years ago to support what she calls her son's "educational journey."

But she also struggles to help her son with his work.

The content provided by the Florida Virtual School curriculum is created with the average student in mind, educators say. That doesn't always leave a lot of wiggle room.

As a middle schooler, Malik is expected to type up essays and answers and submit them in Microsoft Word, but he's never been taught to type. Malik also struggles with spelling and reading, in part due to a learning disability diagnosis.

Gordon told The Tennessean that she has been having Malik write down his answers and she, a former medical transcriptionist, types them up for him. She also notices that her niece, a ninth grader, is struggling with content in math because she doesn't read on grade level and has trouble reading instructions or dissecting math word problems.

"I am computer literate and it's been challenging for me, so I can only imagine how some families are doing," Gordon said in an August interview. "Is he able to learn when other kids (aren't) able to learn? Yes. But is my child still behind? Yes. Is his mom still pushing the issue? Yes. Am I getting kind of tired? Yes."

Gordon praises her son's school, though. When schools closed in the spring, Nashville Classical got their students and teachers online quickly, she said. It wasn't the same, but Malik was still learning.

And now, a paraprofessional who works with students with disabilities at Malik's school will also call and check in with Gordon and Malik in the middle of a lesson, if she notices that Malik is distracted or off-track.

What's next?

As of now, Metro Schools has already began phasing-in students. Some students with disabilities have already returned to the district's special day centers for exceptional education students and grades K-2 can return to school on Tuesday, Oct. 13 — the first school day after fall break.

But high school students like Wilton Alexander won't be able to return until January.

For Hagan-Dier's learning pod, change is in the air after fall break.

One of the students, first grader Ameila Mize, will be returning to in-person learning which means the rest of the pod will be losing its tutor as well.

Pod tutor Treux Noe's daughter is returning to class and could be exposed, so Noe will be helping transition a new tutor to take over the pod after fall break.

Hagan-Dier and some of the other pod families just aren't ready to potentially expose their children, and thus their families, to the virus.

"And we are about seven weeks in now," Hagan-Dier told The Tennessean. "We are starting to get our routines finally established."

The pod plans to stick with virtual learning through the rest of the calendar year and will reasses the decision for next semester.

Hagan-Dier's children attend the public charter school, Explore Community School, and she is confident in the school's ability to social distance students, but the family will consider crossing that bridge in 2021.

Maya and the Price family will keep social-distancing and Maya will stay home for the rest of the school year. Tamara Price said they are making sure Maya still gets to visit with her friends and play in the yard.

"I'm totally glad we aren't doing that to be honest," Tamara Price said of returning to school. "I worry about the teachers and the students and really everyone who is going back."

Victoria Gordon is anxiously awaiting Nashville Classical's reopening timeline, expected to be released by Oct. 2.

For the Alexanders, the kids are counting down the days they can return to the classroom.

Wilton Alexander especially can't wait. He's already excited though — he's at least got basketball practice.

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